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This Spy Who Came In From the Cold Is All Wet

By ALLAN E. GOODMAN

Vitaly Yurchenko is lying.

The Soviet intelligence agent says that he was "forcibly abducted" last August in Rome by the Central Intelligence Agency, brought "unconscious" to the United States, "forced to take some drugs" during his debriefing, and then, on Saturday, "due to a momentary lapse of attention" of his case officers, was given a chance to "break out to freedom and come to the Soviet embassy" in Washington.

These claims have absolutely no basis in fact. U.S. intelligence services rarely encourage defections, and never do so by the use of force and drugs. The CIA would much rather persuade the potential defector to remain in place; once someone defects, his or her connection to information dries up. While Soviet defectors often reveal much-needed details about past KGB methods and operations, the days of scoops on current information are over.

Once here, defectors are handled with kid gloves. Drugs, especially, are anathema. To use drugs would deprive the United States of the all-important high ground in espionage, discourage others from working for us, and call into question any information derived from a defector's debriefing.

To be successful, debriefers need to establish a relationship of trust in order to draw out the most detailed picture possible of the intelligence organization with which the defector was associated.

None of this is easy or pleasant for the defector who knows that he or she is an object of contempt, not only in the country betrayed but in the new one as well. The strain of escape, the permanent severing of family and cultural bonds, the endless hours of debriefing all take their toll.

None of this was evident on the face of Yurchenko as he faced the cameras at his press conference in the Soviet embassy. He was too poised. And his indignant rhetoric about American "kidnappers" was, I suspect, meant to play well in Europe and the Third World on the eve of the U.S.-Soviet summit meeting, at which Soviet human-rights violations are to be discussed.

In short, I think that Yurchenko was a plant, and his debriefers probably suspected him of being one. He would have done better to look a little more bewildered, hung over, mistreated to make his case convincing.

What happened is probably this: Yurchenko, a senior KGB officer, believed that he had convinced U.S. intelligence operatives in Rome that he wished to defect. They played along, reserving judgment until Yurchenko voluntarily entered U.S. territory.

There may have been some early concrete results from the debriefing process if Yurchenko implicated U.S. personnel who appeared to have been working for Soviet intelligence. But the subsequent hours of debriefing must have convinced U.S. experts that Yurchenko was not genuine.

How he got away from U.S. intelligence officers and to the Soviet embassy is anybody's guess. But I think that officials were suspicious enough to tempt him into running. And he did.

The KGB will not be pleased with Yurchenko's performance. He couldn't have learned much in a month to add to what the Soviet intelligence service already knows about the CIA and how it handles defectors. He probably did scare Soviet agents in the United States whose cover might have been shaky. He certainly scared Soviet agents who know the KGB's willingness to expose low-level operatives in order to establish a plant as bona fide.

Yurchenko will probably return to Moscow to a much-publicized hero's welcome—and ostracism by his colleagues and early retirement. I would not be a bit surprised to learn some months from now that an allegedly despondent Vitaly Yurchenko is in a Soviet mental institution and will never be heard from again.

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